

The Ethics of Egyptology and Antiquities Collecting: National Heritage and Global Stewardship

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving ethical landscape of Egyptology and antiquities collecting, focusing on the tension between nationalist and internationalist perspectives on cultural heritage. It argues that archaeological ethics should prioritize the preservation of contextual integrity and public accessibility over market value and institutional prestige.

The study analyses key ethical challenges, including looting, the illicit antiquities trade, museum acquisition policies, deaccessioning practices, and publication standards for unprovenanced artifacts. Professional organizations and academic journals have increasingly adopted stringent guidelines, exemplified by the 1970 UNESCO Convention and the Archaeological Institute of America's (AIA) 1973 cutoff date for the publication of undocumented objects. The article also highlights the contributions of specialized bodies such as the International Society for Nubian Studies (ISNS), whose comprehensive code of ethics emphasizes the researcher's role as a "custodian of understanding," carrying significant responsibilities toward source communities.

Through a comparative analysis of Egypt and Sudan, the study demonstrates that heritage ethics transcend national boundaries while acknowledging the distinct structural and resource-related challenges faced by source countries. Recent developments include enhanced international cooperation in repatriation efforts, a growing emphasis on community engagement, and innovative approaches—such as digital documentation and temporary exhibitions—that decouple cultural appreciation from permanent ownership.

The article concludes that effective heritage protection requires coordinated, multi-stakeholder collaboration among governments, museums, scholars, and the public. It underscores the need to continue refining ethical frameworks to address both colonial legacies and contemporary challenges. Ultimately, the preservation of ancient Egyptian and Nubian heritage depends on a model of global stewardship that balances sovereign rights with the shared responsibility to safeguard the archaeological record for future generations through inclusive, collaborative, and ethically grounded practices.

Keywords: Egyptology ethics, Antiquities looting, Cultural heritage repatriation, Museum acquisition policies, Unprovenanced artifacts

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تتناول هذه المقالة المشهد الأخلاقي المتطور في علم المصريات وجمع الآثار، مستكشفةً الجدل القائم بين المنظورين القومي والأممي تجاه التراث الثقافي. وتجادل بأن الأخلاقيات المرتبطة بالعمل الأثري يجب أن تُعطي الأولوية للحفاظ على المعلومات السياقية وإتاحتها للعامّة على حساب قيم السوق أو المكانة المؤسسية. وتحلل الدراسة التحديات الأخلاقية الرئيسية، بما في ذلك أعمال النهب، والاتجار غير المشروع بالآثار، وممارسات اقتناء المتاحف، وإخراج المقتنيات من المجموعات المتحفية، ومعايير النشر الخاصة بالقطع الأثرية مجهولة المصدر. وقد تبنت المنظمات والمجالات المهنية بشكل متزايد مبادئ توجيهية صارمة، مثل اتفاقية اليونسكو لعام 1970، وتاريخ 1973 الذي اعتمده المعهد الأثري لأمريكا كحد فاصل لنشر القطع غير الموثقة. يسلط المقال الضوء على إسهامات الهيئات المختصة بمناطق محددة مثل الجمعية الدولية للدراسات النوبية (ISNS)، التي توفر مدونتها الأخلاقية التفصيلية إطاراً متيناً يؤكد على دور الباحث بصفته "أميئاً على الفهم" وتقع على عاتقه واجبات عميقة تجاه مجتمعات المصدر. ومن خلال تحليل مقارن لمصر والسودان، يُظهر المقال أن أخلاقيات التراث تتجاوز الحدود الوطنية، مع الاعتراف في الوقت نفسه بالتحديات المتميزة التي تواجهها بلدان المصدر ذات الموارد المحدودة. وتشمل التطورات الحديثة تعزيز التعاون الدولي في مجال استعادة الآثار، وزيادة التركيز على إشراك المجتمع المحلي، واتباع نهج مبتكرة مثل التوثيق الرقمي والمعارض الموقّعة التي تفصل التقدير الثقافي عن التملك الدائم. يخلص المقال إلى أن حماية التراث بفعالية تتطلب تعاوناً متعدد الأوجه بين الحكومات والمتاحف والعلماء والجمهور، مع استمرار المنظمات المهنية في تحسين القواعد الأخلاقية التي تعالج الإرث الاستعماري والتحديات المعاصرة. وفي النهاية، فإن الحفاظ على التراث المصري القديم والنوبي يعتمد على مسؤولية عالمية تحترم الحقوق السيادية ومصالحة الإنسانية المشتركة في صون السجل الأثري للأجيال القادمة، من خلال علاقات شاملة وتعاونية وقائمة على الاحترام.

1. Introduction

The study of ancient Egypt is inextricably intertwined with questions of politics, nationalism, and ethics. Research agendas and museum exhibitions are often shaped not only by scholarly inquiry but also by national identity and global cultural interests. As a result, Egyptology can "generate and legitimize myths" about the past that resonate powerfully with contemporary audiences. This interpretive power underscores the need for scholars to critically examine how their work affects source communities and the integrity of the archaeological record.

In recent decades, professional organizations and institutions—including the International Association of Egyptologists (IAE), the International Committee for Egyptology (CIPEG/ICOM), and leading journal editors—have developed ethical guidelines to address challenges such as looting, illicit antiquities trade, and the publication of unprovenanced artifacts. Complementing these efforts, area-specific bodies such as the International Society for Nubian Studies (ISNS) have introduced detailed ethical frameworks that emphasize the researcher's role as a "custodian of understanding," with clear responsibilities toward heritage and source communities.

This study revisits key debates in Egyptological ethics, drawing on illustrative case studies—particularly a comparative perspective on Egypt and Sudan—while incorporating recent developments in the field. It adopts a structured academic approach while retaining a seminar-style engagement through the use of vivid examples and

reflective questions, encouraging critical dialogue on the evolving responsibilities of researchers in the stewardship of cultural heritage.

2. Nationalist and Internationalist Perspectives on Heritage

A longstanding debate in cultural heritage discourse pits nationalist and internationalist perspectives against one another. Nationalist approaches emphasize the sovereign rights of source countries to control, protect, and reclaim their antiquities through mechanisms such as export restrictions and repatriation claims. In contrast, internationalist perspectives invoke the notion of a "common heritage of humanity," advocating for the global circulation and shared stewardship of cultural objects. In practice, however, these positions rarely exist as rigid opposites; instead, they form a continuum of nuanced, often overlapping viewpoints shaped by legal, ethical, and political considerations.

UNESCO's cultural heritage instruments reflect elements of both nationalist and internationalist perspectives. For example, the 1978 *Recommendation on the Protection of Movable Cultural Property* affirms that such property "forms part of the common heritage of mankind," while also asserting that "every State is therefore morally responsible to the international community as a whole for its safeguarding." Similarly, the 1976 *UNESCO Recommendation on the International Exchange of Cultural Property* adopts a

broad definition of "international exchange," encompassing not only loans and donations but also sales and transfers of ownership between museums under mutually agreed conditions.

In other words, UNESCO acknowledges that inter-museum exchanges—including the sale or transfer of surplus duplicates—can constitute legitimate forms of cultural sharing when conducted within an ethical framework. What ultimately matters is safeguarding archaeological context and ensuring public access. As one scholar observes, "it is not inherently significant whether an artifact from Kerma, Sudan—particularly a duplicate—resides in a museum in Boston or Warsaw, provided that the integrity of its context is preserved and the object remains accessible within the public domain."

This principle aligns closely with the professional ethos of stewardship, which conceptualizes researchers and institutions not as owners, but as custodians of a shared cultural legacy. The central insight is that archaeological knowledge derives primarily from context rather than from isolated objects. Materials such as pottery fragments, charcoal, seeds, and bones—often of little market value—can yield critical historical and scientific information when properly documented.

Looting disrupts this contextual integrity, resulting in the irreversible loss of knowledge. Archaeological sites and monuments, including those of ancient Egypt, which have long attracted scholarly and public interest, are valuable not merely for their aesthetic qualities but also for the historical narratives they embody. Each act of illicit excavation destroys stratigraphic relationships and associated data, effectively erasing information that

could otherwise be recovered through systematic scientific methods. As such, the loss is not only material but epistemic.

Ultimately, whether an artifact is housed in Cairo or Chicago is of secondary importance to its preservation, documentation, and accessibility. Ethical stewardship is best realized through transparent institutional practices—particularly museums and scholarly publications—that ensure continued public engagement and academic scrutiny, rather than through restricted or private ownership.

Practical considerations are equally critical in the protection of cultural heritage. Effective preservation requires governments to enact and rigorously enforce robust legal frameworks. Under the 1970 UNESCO Convention, each nation is understood to act as a "trustee for humanity," bearing responsibility not only to its own citizens but to the international community at large. In an ideal scenario, every artifact would possess a fully documented provenance and be subject to lawful export procedures.

Some scholars advocate a more stringent, "utopian" standard: requiring all antiquities to have a verifiable chain of custody extending back to a fixed cutoff date—commonly 1970—and treating undocumented objects as presumptively illicit. Although most art-importing countries have not yet adopted such a strict legal presumption, legislative frameworks are gradually evolving in this direction. For instance, the United States has implemented cultural property import controls and strengthened compliance requirements over the past few decades. At the same time, reducing market demand remains an urgent priority. Public

awareness initiatives that emphasize the importance of archaeological context and the ethical implications of collecting are essential. As one expert succinctly notes, "curbing looting requires an educated public unwilling to purchase items not rightfully for sale." Museums and scholars play a pivotal role in this effort, both by promoting public understanding and by upholding rigorous ethical standards in acquisition, research, and publication practices.

3. Museums and scholars have a special role to play in leading this awareness and enforcing high ethical standards.

Looting, the Antiquities Market, and Private Collecting

Since the adoption of the 1970 UNESCO Convention—and even earlier—the illicit antiquities trade has been widely recognized as a global problem. The looting of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo in February 2011, followed by the emergence of what has been described as a "large-scale industry" of site plundering across Egypt, provides a stark illustration of this crisis. Looters have excavated deep pits at thousands of archaeological sites throughout the country, a pattern mirrored in regions such as Peru, Guatemala, India, China, and Mali, where cultural heritage is similarly threatened by illicit excavation.

This phenomenon is fundamentally demand-driven. The increasingly sophisticated preferences of modern collectors have transformed looting into an organized, transnational enterprise. Both journalistic investigations and

scholarly analyses consistently emphasize that the destruction of archaeological sites is closely tied to market demand. Archaeologists and museum professionals have repeatedly cautioned that private collecting practices contribute directly to this problem by incentivizing further looting.

In the absence of a market willing to pay high prices for undocumented artifacts, the economic incentives that sustain looting would be significantly diminished. Thus, addressing the illicit antiquities trade requires not only stronger legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms but also a critical reassessment of collecting practices and market dynamics.

Nevertheless, looted antiquities continue to circulate widely. Many collectors—and, regrettably, some museums—have historically operated under a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to provenance. In a seminal study, Chippindale and Gill found that approximately 75% of antiquities in major private and museum collections lacked documented provenance, a figure echoed in subsequent analyses of the antiquities market. When provenance is unclear or absent, both the authenticity and legal status of objects become inherently suspect.

In response, cultural institutions have increasingly adopted stricter acquisition and publication policies. Museums now often require well-documented ownership histories—frequently extending back to a pre-1970 benchmark—and, in some cases, decline to acquire antiquities altogether. Similarly, the *American Journal of Archaeology* (AJA) prohibits the publication of undocumented artifacts acquired after December 30, 1973, except

under narrowly defined circumstances. The Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) permits limited exceptions only when the explicit aim is to demonstrate the loss of archaeological context; otherwise, such material is excluded from scholarly publication.

These measures reflect a growing consensus that even the study or display of unprovenanced objects, if undertaken without strict ethical safeguards, risks legitimizing illicit markets and incentivizing further looting. This position aligns with the ethical framework of organizations such as the ISNS, whose code of conduct explicitly instructs members to avoid activities that enhance the commercial value of archaeological objects—particularly those outside public institutions—and to refrain from any involvement with the illicit antiquities trade as defined by the 1970 UNESCO Convention.

4. Museums, Deaccessioning, and Incentives

Museums and other public institutions bear the primary responsibility for safeguarding and interpreting antiquities on behalf of society. In contrast, private collecting often removes artifacts from the public domain, limiting their accessibility for research and education. It is frequently emphasized that "the role of museums is fundamentally to educate the public and to serve as repositories of our shared historic and artistic patrimony," positioning them as key actors within the internationalist vision of cultural heritage stewardship.

This responsibility is formalized in professional ethical frameworks. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics—endorsed in the context of

Egyptology by CIPEG—requires museums to operate with "responsibility, transparency, and accountability" while serving the public interest. Similarly, professional organizations such as the Society for American Archaeology (SAA), the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), and the IAE mandate adherence to rigorous ethical standards among their members.

Importantly, this duty extends beyond acquisition policies to encompass the long-term preservation of collections, responsible curation, and the development of collaborative and respectful relationships with source communities. In this sense, museums function not merely as custodians of objects but as stewards of cultural knowledge and facilitators of public engagement.

Museums nonetheless operate within significant financial and institutional constraints. Public funding for archaeology and museum operations is often insufficient, particularly in North America and Europe, compelling institutions to seek support from private donors and sponsors. While such partnerships can be beneficial, they may also introduce ethical tensions—especially when benefactors are collectors of antiquities themselves.

In some cases, museum professionals have informally advised private collectors on acquisitions, including objects lacking clear provenance, with the implicit expectation that these collections may later be donated to the institution. Such arrangements risk creating conflicts of interest: collectors gain privileged access to expertise and acquisition opportunities, while museums may, even unintentionally,

legitimize and encourage the continued purchase of antiquities.

These dynamics blur the boundaries between stewardship and market participation. By exhibiting and valorizing certain classes of artifacts, museums may inadvertently signal their desirability, thereby reinforcing demand within the antiquities market. Critics argue that this demand is a primary driver of looting and that the market would contract significantly if museums adopted stricter non-acquisition policies. As one observer succinctly notes, "if collectors were not willing to pay exorbitant amounts for artifacts, destructive looting would not be so rampant."

At the same time, museum practices are undergoing significant reassessment. Ongoing debates address whether even museum-to-museum exchanges—or the sale of duplicate objects—can be considered ethically acceptable. In the Sudanese context discussed below, for example, one might argue that allowing a national museum to deaccession duplicate or lower-priority objects could generate funds for conservation or broader cultural development initiatives. Indeed, UNESCO's 1976 Recommendation explicitly acknowledges the sale of cultural property as "a legitimate means of inter-institutional transfer," alongside loans and donations.

In practice, however, an increasing number of scholars and professional bodies discourage any transactions that risk reinforcing the commercial antiquities market. Instead, they advocate for alternative models of collaboration, including long-term loans, traveling exhibitions, and external support through governmental or philanthropic funding.

Recent discourse further promotes the development of cooperative museum networks in which collections are shared without monetary exchange, thereby redirecting resources toward research, conservation, and fieldwork rather than market competition.

One related challenge is deaccessioning: the formal process by which a museum removes an object from its collection, sometimes through sale. This practice has generated substantial ethical debate, particularly concerning whether any financial proceeds should be directed toward the institution's public mission or reinvested into the existing collection. Museums worldwide continue to navigate this issue within a complex framework shaped by trust law, international conventions, and institutional guidelines, which often lack full harmonization.

Within Egyptological contexts, CIPEG has emphasized the need for clear, consistent ethical codes governing both deaccessioning and the acquisition of ancient Egyptian material. Parallel efforts by other professional bodies have similarly sought to strengthen standards. The AAM and the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), for example, have issued guidelines promoting rigorous due diligence, transparency, and comprehensive provenance research before acquisition or disposal decisions.

Taken together, these evolving policies reflect a growing institutional commitment to accountability. Increasingly, museums recognize that the responsibilities associated with exhibiting antiquities are inseparable from the prestige of ownership, requiring sustained ethical stewardship, transparency, and

public accountability throughout the lifecycle of a collection.

5. Ethical Codes and Professional Standards

In recent decades, ethical standards in Egyptology have been significantly shaped by international conventions and professional codes. The 1970 UNESCO Convention, ratified by more than 140 states, obliges signatories to prohibit the illicit import and export of cultural property and to facilitate its restitution when appropriate. Its preamble underscores that "the stakes are the preservation and confidentiality of archaeological and historical knowledge and information," highlighting the epistemic value of archaeological context alongside material heritage.

Beyond UNESCO, professional organizations and scholarly platforms have established increasingly explicit ethical frameworks. The IAE requires its members to adhere to "the highest standards of ethical and responsible behaviour" across all Egyptological activities. Similarly, the ICOM, through its Egyptology committee (CIPEG), emphasizes museums' responsibility to uphold principles of "equity, mutual respect, openness, integrity, responsibility, and accountability" in collections management.

CIPEG has further advocated for the development of discipline-specific ethical guidelines for ancient Egyptian collections, recognizing that regionally and materially specific challenges require more tailored regulatory and professional responses.

Complementing these broader international guidelines, regionally focused scholarly societies have developed more detailed ethical frameworks tailored to field-specific contexts. The Code of Ethics of the ISNS, for example, articulates a comprehensive set of principles that positions researchers as "custodians of understanding," with a "profound duty to the peoples, species, and materials they study, as well as to the communities with whom they collaborate." This framework emphasizes transparency in research design, the practice of dynamic, ongoing informed consent, and a commitment to "upholding principles of equality and inclusivity," while explicitly rejecting any form of discrimination. Such provisions provide a particularly robust model for ethical conduct in Egyptology, given the shared archaeological, cultural, and geographical landscape of the Nile Valley.

Parallel developments are evident in scholarly publishing standards. In 2020, the AJA, under the auspices of the AIA, adopted stringent policies regarding the publication of undocumented antiquities. The journal now prohibits the initial publication of objects in both private and public collections acquired after 1973 unless they can be demonstrated to have been documented before that date or legally exported. Undocumented objects that have previously appeared in the scholarly record may still be referenced, but only with an explicit "[unprovenanced]" designation and an accompanying cautionary note.

This policy reflects a broader international shift in academic ethics. Many journals and professional associations now discourage or restrict engagement with unprovenanced material because

scholarly attention can inadvertently increase its market value, thereby incentivizing looting. In effect, contemporary academic standards increasingly align with ethical imperatives in collecting and museum practice: when an object's provenance is uncertain or compromised, non-engagement is often regarded as the most responsible course of action.

As an illustration of ethics in practice, the AJA policy includes a narrowly defined exception: editors may permit the publication of an unprovenanced object if doing so highlights the consequences of lost archaeological context and thereby raises awareness of the harms associated with the illicit trade. This exception recognizes that controlled scholarly discussion can, in certain cases, contribute to broader ethical and educational objectives.

One scholar has compared this dilemma to biomedical ethics, suggesting that, analogous to the use of ethics statements in medical research involving human or animal subjects, archaeological scholarship may require explicit ethical disclosures when engaging with illicit or unprovenanced material. Under this analogy, even when such material must be studied—for example, to expose forgery or to educate the public about looting practices—it should be accompanied by clear ethical justification and transparent disclaimers.

More broadly, there is a growing professional consensus that museums and scholars should act as models of responsible practice. Institutions such as the AJA, the SAA, and the AAM consistently advocate rigorous provenance research, the rejection of illicitly obtained material,

and strengthened collaboration with source countries. These standards continue to evolve in response to emerging challenges, including the ethical complexities of colonial-era collections and ongoing debates surrounding restitution and repatriation.

6. Publication Ethics and Unprovenanced Artifacts

A particularly contentious issue concerns whether academic publications should depict or describe artifacts of uncertain or illicit origin. One position holds that publishing studies of looted material risks conferring legitimacy and indirectly sustaining the illicit antiquities trade. An opposing view argues that excluding such objects from scholarly scrutiny leaves potentially valuable information unexamined and does little to deter looting; moreover, rigorous technical analysis can sometimes expose forgeries and thereby contribute to combating illicit markets.

In practice, most peer-reviewed journals have adopted a precautionary stance. As noted, the AJA, under the AIA, generally treats unprovenanced objects acquired after 1973 as ineligible for initial publication, with limited exceptions—primarily where the discussion explicitly foregrounds the loss of archaeological context.

Whether further exceptions should be permitted remains debated. One potential area concerns human remains or tomb assemblages lacking secure archaeological context, where some journals nonetheless require either demonstrable provenance or a clear and compelling justification for publication. More broadly, there is widespread scholarly consensus that

presenting artifacts of uncertain origin in a manner that appears to valorize or normalize illicit acquisition is ethically problematic. In such cases, any marginal scholarly benefit is generally considered to be outweighed by the risk of legitimizing destructive collecting practices.

At the same time, some cultural heritage scholars have proposed narrowly defined exceptions for educational purposes. For instance, museums or universities may display confiscated antiquities with full transparency regarding their illicit history, explicitly framing them as case studies in looting and trafficking. Similarly, in academic writing, unprovenanced objects may be cited not to advance typological or interpretive analysis, but to illustrate the broader phenomenon of illicit trade. Such exceptions, however, are only ethically defensible when accompanied by explicit disclosure of intent and a clear pedagogical or critical justification.

Overall, however, the prevailing trend is increasingly firm. As noted, "research and publication... do not substitute for ethical review when studies involve problematic material," and accordingly, clear, consistently applied standards are required. The emerging consensus holds that artifacts lacking secure legal provenance should generally be excluded from archaeological scholarship and museum display, except in narrowly defined circumstances where inclusion demonstrably serves a broader public interest—such as exposing forgery, documenting illicit trade, or raising awareness of the consequences of archaeological context loss.

7. Case Studies and Comparisons: Egypt vs. Sudan

Comparing the situations in Egypt and Sudan underscores the broadly universal character of these ethical challenges. Whether an artifact originates in Kerma, Sudan, or in sites within Egypt itself, the core principles of archaeological ethics—contextual preservation and public accessibility—remain fundamentally the same, provided that scholarly integrity and public access are maintained. Both countries face parallel pressures, including the looting of sites in the Nile Valley, constrained museum resources, and sustained international demand for antiquities.

Nevertheless, Sudan presents distinctive structural challenges. Its modern archaeological institutions are comparatively young and operate with significantly less funding than those in Egypt. In this context, proposals from Sudanese cultural authorities to exchange or deaccession duplicate objects to finance research and institutional development have raised complex ethical questions. Such proposals prompt a broader normative issue: whether economically constrained source countries should be restricted from leveraging cultural assets to strengthen their heritage infrastructure. UNESCO's 1976 Recommendation on the International Exchange of Cultural Property suggests a more flexible position, explicitly recognizing "sale" as a legitimate form of inter-institutional transfer under defined conditions.

Recent developments further illustrate these dynamics. In early 2026, UNESCO

convened a high-level conference on the protection of Sudan's cultural heritage amid ongoing conflict. Sudanese curators, legal experts, and community representatives collaborated with international partners to address widespread looting in conflict-affected regions, emphasizing improved site inventories, strengthened legal frameworks, and greater community engagement. This reflects a growing recognition—also articulated in the ISNS Code of Ethics—that heritage is not only a scholarly resource but also a component of identity formation and post-conflict recovery. The ISNS code explicitly calls for "fostering positive working relationships with all stakeholders... including local communities, museums, universities, and relevant government agencies," as well as obtaining appropriate permissions and demonstrating respect for traditional beliefs.

Egypt, while possessing more established institutional frameworks, continues to face persistent threats from illicit excavation at major sites such as Saqqara and Tanis, alongside ongoing efforts to repatriate cultural property and promote heritage tourism. In both Egypt and Sudan, effective protection increasingly depends on coordinated collaboration among national authorities, international organizations, and law enforcement agencies, as demonstrated in joint operations involving Egyptian authorities, Interpol, and European and U.S. partners targeting antiquities trafficking networks.

Another key distinction lies in the respective legal frameworks governing cultural heritage. Egypt established antiquities legislation at an early stage, with some of the earliest regulatory measures dating to 1835, whereas Sudan's

heritage legislation has developed more recently and remains comparatively evolving. In practice, Sudan's ongoing political instability has further complicated enforcement capacity and the protection of archaeological sites.

Nevertheless, important progress has been made. In recent years, cooperation with international partners—including the United States and the United Kingdom—has facilitated the repatriation of thousands of Sudanese cultural objects, while additional restitutions have been carried out by countries such as Egypt and France.

Taken together, the comparison between Egypt and Sudan highlights that cultural heritage ethics cannot be confined to any single national context. The principles of documentation, accessibility, and long-term preservation apply equally in Khartoum and Cairo. The archaeological legacy of ancient Nubia, located within modern Sudan, is of no lesser significance to global heritage than that of Pharaonic Egypt, reinforcing the fundamentally shared and transnational nature of archaeological stewardship.

8. Recent Developments and Ongoing Challenges

The discussion has evolved in several significant ways, particularly through the increasing involvement of civil society and the media in heritage ethics. High-profile repatriation cases, alongside investigative journalism, have brought greater public attention to looted collections and questionable acquisition histories in major museums. Scholars such as Tsirogiannis have noted that sustained press coverage has, in some cases, prompted private

collectors to return objects of uncertain provenance voluntarily.

At the institutional level, governments and regulatory bodies have also become more proactive. In the United States, recent years have witnessed strengthened enforcement of cultural property import restrictions, accompanied by major indictments targeting trafficking networks and auction houses involved in the illicit trade of antiquities. Museums have likewise begun to reassess their historical collecting practices. Many institutions now employ dedicated provenance researchers and increasingly publish documentation when objects are repatriated. The AAM reinforces this shift by recommending the use of 1970 as a guiding ethical benchmark for acquisitions, in alignment with the 1970 UNESCO Convention.

Concurrently, museums and cultural institutions are exploring strategies to decouple scholarly engagement from material acquisition. There is a growing emphasis on long-term loans, collaborative exhibitions, and expanded digital access. For instance, partnerships between Egyptian authorities and international museums increasingly prioritize temporary exhibitions subject to stringent provenance and conservation review, rather than permanent transfers of ownership. Technological initiatives, including virtual reality and 3D scanning, further enable the global dissemination of cultural heritage without physically displacing objects.

At the same time, debates surrounding deaccessioning remain unresolved. Some argue that the carefully regulated sale of duplicate objects may be ethically defensible when it supports conservation or public benefit, while others caution that

any participation in market mechanisms risks legitimizing the broader antiquities trade. As such, the question remains open, reflecting the continuing tension between pragmatic institutional needs and principled opposition to commodification.

One ironic dimension of museum practice is that, by exhibiting highly visible and aesthetically compelling antiquities, institutions may inadvertently contribute to the formation of collector demand. The public display of spectacular pharaonic objects, for example, can signal their cultural prestige and desirability, thereby reinforcing their perceived value within private collecting markets. In response to this tension, some museums have begun to curate exhibitions that are more critically oriented, explicitly addressing looting, illicit trafficking, and repatriation, thereby reframing antiquities as elements of shared heritage rather than commodities. Educational initiatives increasingly emphasize that ethical stewardship and contextual integrity outweigh questions of ownership or financial value. This principle is echoed in the ISNS Code of Ethics, which asserts that "intellectual property should be treated in accordance with the principles of stewardship, rather than as a matter of personal possession"—a formulation that is readily extendable to material cultural heritage as well.

At the global level, professional ethics frameworks continue to evolve. Between 2022 and 2025, the ICOM engaged in sustained deliberation on revisions to its Code of Ethics, with particular attention to colonial legacies, restitution, and decolonization processes. The statutes of the IAE, updated in 2024, similarly reinforce expectations of member accountability and ethical responsibility. In parallel, scholarly journals such as the

Bulletin of the American Society of Overseas Research (BASOR) and *Studies in Egyptian Archaeology and Science* (SEAS) have introduced stricter editorial policies requiring demonstrable provenance for published material and associated imagery. Notably, in 2020, the AIA formally revised its ethics policy, aligning closely with the publication standards already adopted by the *AJA*.

Finally, education is increasingly recognized as a central pillar of ethical reform. The 2026 UNESCO conference on Sudan emphasized community engagement and youth participation as essential components of sustainable heritage protection, particularly in post-conflict contexts. Similarly, initiatives in Egypt have expanded training programs for local surveyors, heritage professionals, and law enforcement personnel to strengthen site protection and documentation. These efforts reflect a growing recognition of cultural heritage not only as an object of academic inquiry but also as a foundation for identity, resilience, and reconstruction. The ISNS Code of Ethics explicitly devotes substantial attention to pedagogy, emphasizing educators' responsibility to "emphasize the ethical challenges inherent in all phases of Nubian Studies" and to "actively promote ethical conduct within the discipline." Such commitments to cultivating ethical awareness among emerging scholars are essential for the long-term integrity and sustainability of the field.

Conclusion

The ethical landscape of Egyptology and antiquities collecting is inherently complex and continually evolving. No single policy or instrument can eliminate

the illicit trade in cultural property in its entirety; however, a multi-layered and coordinated approach offers the most viable path forward. States must act as custodians of their national heritage through effective legislation, enforcement, and international cooperation. Archaeologists and museums, in turn, are obliged to prioritize public interest by safeguarding archaeological context, ensuring transparency, and supporting restitution where appropriate, rather than privileging market value or institutional prestige. Professional associations and scholarly journals must continue to refine ethical frameworks in response to emerging challenges and shifting global conditions. As articulated in the ISNS Code of Ethics, researchers bear a "profound duty to the peoples, species, and materials they study," with the ultimate objective not of preserving objects in isolation, but of safeguarding human history for future generations.

In practical terms, this ethical orientation requires the consistent refusal to legitimize illicitly acquired antiquities, alongside strengthened public education initiatives and sustained efforts to maintain open access to cultural heritage. Collectors and institutions alike must recognize that engagement with antiquities carries significant moral responsibility; acquisition divorced from provenance and historical accountability is no longer ethically defensible. The cases of Egypt and Sudan demonstrate that archaeological ethics transcend national boundaries, underscoring the reality that cultural heritage is part of a shared human past. As UNESCO has repeatedly emphasized, cultural property should be understood not merely as national patrimony, but as part of the heritage of humanity. By fostering inclusive and

collaborative relationships and approaching archaeological practice with humility, empathy, and respect, the global community can work to ensure that this shared heritage remains both protected and meaningfully accessible.

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